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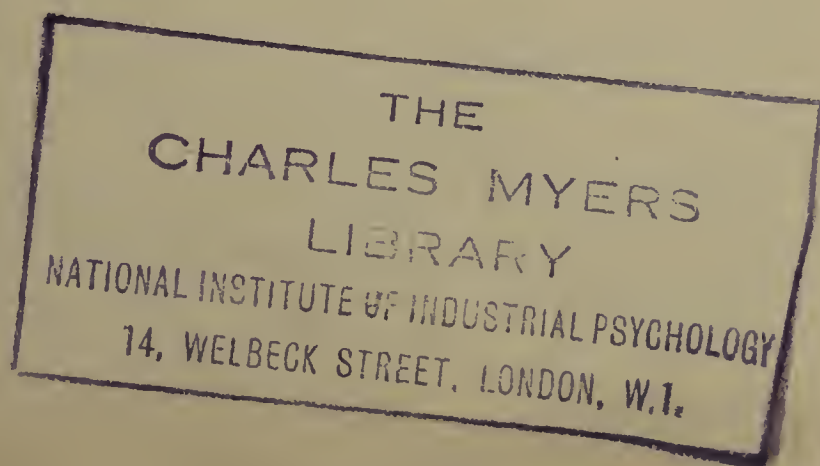


THE USE OF GRUESOME AND HUMOROUS PROPAGANDA FOR ACCIDENT PREVENTION

By CHARLES S. MYERS

Reprinted from THE HUMAN FACTOR, Vol. x, Nos. 7-8
JULY-AUGUST 1936

PUBLISHED AT THE OFFICES OF THE INSTITUTE
ALDWYCH HOUSE, ALDWYCH, W C 2



The Use of Gruesome and Humorous Propaganda for Accident Prevention¹

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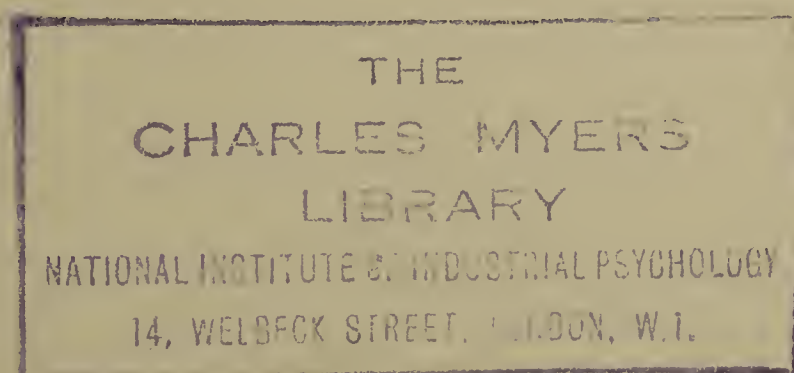
Dr. Myers quotes and criticizes current examples of gruesome and humorous accident-prevention propaganda. He maintains that gruesome propaganda (which is little used in this country) is liable to defeat its own ends, either by producing fear or, more subtly, by producing contempt for danger as a defence-mechanism. Humorous propaganda may also, though in a different way, produce contempt for danger: for the appreciation of humour is often associated with a feeling of superiority, and with a greater or less degree of escape from reality.

THE problem which we are about to discuss is one of undoubted importance. We are met to consider whether and, if so, how far accidents—alike on the roads, in industry and elsewhere—can be reduced by exhibiting posters or objects, or by distributing information by other methods, which are deliberately designed so as to arouse fear, on the one hand, or amusement, on the other hand, in the minds of those who are exposed to the risks of incurring accidents. Fear and amusement are generally so completely opposed to one another that the value of gruesome propaganda and the value of humorous propaganda demand separate consideration. I will deal first with the gruesome.

FEAR AND INSTRUCTION

Shall we not agree that the object of propaganda for accident prevention is to inculcate the adoption of safe lines of conduct, and that such propaganda must therefore be regarded as a form of mass instruction? If so, the next question which confronts us is whether fear of the consequences of misconduct is a suitable method for obtaining the best results from instruction. Let us consider school-teaching as an example, and ask ourselves whether it is a wise method to warn a child that if he does not attend to and learn what is presented to him, he will assuredly receive corporal or mental punishment. More broadly, let us ask ourselves whether the fear of punishment for wrong conduct is the best means of securing the right conduct which we wish to promote.

¹ A paper given at the National Safety Congress held in London on May 21, 1936.



To what extent does fear really prevent bad conduct? How successfully does the fear of imprisonment prevent crime or the fear of capital punishment prevent murder? How far does the fear of hell or the fear of the devil make for morally good conduct? I recall a method of instruction in bayonet drill which was used in France during the early months of the Great War: our soldiers were being taught what horrible tortures they would endure from the enemy if they were made prisoners, and how necessary therefore it was that they should learn to bayonet him successfully—until one day this instructor was superseded by another who obtained far better results than those of his predecessor by stressing the high ideals for which the British were fighting and the totally different aims of German *Kultur*.

There can be no doubt that in more primitive civilizations good conduct was largely assured by the fear of witchcraft or by the fear of God. It may well be that in the past frequent murders and other anti-social crimes could have been reduced by exhibiting posters that depicted a man hanging from the gallows or burning in hell. But such methods of promoting morality are fast becoming obsolete in more advanced social conditions. No doubt there remain, and there will always remain, a minority among ourselves who, through congenital defect or owing to adverse environment, are socially less advanced: the brute will never be wholly extinguished. For him the cat-o'-nine-tails when adult, or (less rarely) the cane when a child, will probably continue to be necessary. And in car driving or in other dangerous situations in occupational life, the conduct of the incurably callous or the cruel can perhaps only be regulated by fear—not by the fear of the suffering which his misdeeds will cause to others, but by the fear of the harm which they will bring to himself.

CURRENT EXAMPLES OF GRUESOME PROPAGANDA

Let us consider some of the gruesome material which is at present employed or advocated in accident propaganda. Certain industries abroad have exhibited posters on which a blood-dripping hand is displayed with two fingers of it missing, just amputated by a circular saw, or which depict the agonized expression of a woman worker whose hand has just been pierced by a drill or of a man who is about to be crushed beneath a falling girder, or a corpse with the underlying (German) slogan, "loose working clothes mean death shrouds."

“What is needed” for the prevention of road accidents, urges Mr. J. C. Furnas, an American writer, “is a vivid and *sustained* realization that every time you step on the throttle, death gets in beside you, hopefully waiting for his chance.”¹ And according to an English journalist, “the pedestrian must be taught that the moment his foot leaves the pavement for the road the sudden danger of death or accident immediately presents itself.”²

If fear has, as I have suggested, some restraining value for the small minority, the cruel and callous, it is certainly very harmful, at the opposite extreme, for the far larger number of the timid, anxious and ‘nervous’ members of our community. The mere fear of the consequences of dangerous behaviour may irresistibly impel these people to such behaviour. There are many industrial workers who are more or less subconsciously afraid of the machines at which they daily work. This is likewise the case in certain car drivers. In them (and also in others) gruesome propaganda will only increase (or arouse) fear in a situation of danger and will thus only increase the risk of accidents. I know of a motorist who saw once a poster depicting a horrible accident on a piece of road well known to her. She assures me that the result has been that when she passes this spot she always drives badly and dangerously, through the sheer panic of impending disaster.

But a Conference on Safety, held in New Jersey in September last, would go still further than this. It reports: “The exhibition of two wrecked cars in front of the State Memorial Building had a salutary and lasting effect (no evidence, however, is adduced in support of this assertion) on the minds of all who viewed these cars and read the appropriate signs displayed above them.” The General Committee of this Conference suggests that wherever possible it would be desirable for the motor vehicle department, after fatal accidents of this type, to exhibit wrecked cars with proper descriptive signs at important highway intersections throughout the State, as a moral lesson to other motorists of the death and destruction that can and will result from continued reckless driving and carelessness.

¹ In an article entitled “——And Sudden Death,” written for *The Leader's Digest*, New York.

² *The Leader*, Jan. 14, 1936.

The same Committee recommends also that the motor vehicle department be given power to secure from the State Police and from all local police departments throughout New Jersey photographs of all fatal car accidents occurring in the State, and that these photographs be so taken as to be as gruesome as possible, showing the dead bodies of accident victims lying on blood-stained highways. Indeed arrangements are to be made to send to all newspapers in New Jersey matrix reproductions of these photographs, with the request that the newspapers publish these horrible pictures prominently so that thousands of thoughtless drivers may witness the terrible destruction and suffering which follows in the wake of reckless driving.

Even more gruesome is the pamphlet by Mr. Furnas, from which I have already quoted. It bears the introductory note : " Those who find themselves affected [nauseated] at the outset are cautioned against reading the article in its entirety," and it contains such passages as these : " This spring, a wrecking crew pried the door off a car which had been overturned down an embankment and out stepped the driver with only a scratch on his cheek. But his mother was still inside, a splinter of wood from the top driven 4 inches into her brain as a result of son's taking a greasy curve a little too fast. No blood—no horribly twisted bones—just a grey-haired corpse still clutching her pocket-book in her lap as she had clutched it when she felt the car leave the road." " Overturning cars specialize in certain injuries. Cracked pelvis, for instance, guaranteeing agonizing months in bed, motionless, perhaps crippled for life—broken spine resulting from sheer sidewise twist—the minor details of smashed knees and splintered shoulder blades caused by crashing into the side of the car as she goes over with the swirl of an insane roller coaster—and the lethal consequences of broken ribs, which puncture hearts and lungs with their raw ends."

It is the psychologist's prime function to study individual and national mental differences. And he will be the first to admit that what will appear horrible to one person or nation may excite merely curiosity and wonder in another. But surely we shall all concede that such propaganda as the preceding will never be generally successful, nor widely employed, at all events in Great Britain.

It may be urged that we should be satisfied if propaganda against accidents succeeded not by positive instruction in right doing, but first in arresting attention and then in persuading the public to avoid a dangerous

situation. But such attraction and persuasion (as in the case of advertisements) can be far better achieved by other methods than the use of the gruesome.

AMUSEMENT AND INSTRUCTION

Interest and instruction in the consequences of misconduct as well as in right conduct are possible through posters or by other methods of propaganda, without evoking extreme fear or horror. And although sufficient interest may be aroused pictorially in other ways, the use of a humorous situation is certainly admissible. But the humorous must be in good taste ; and there is nothing which is either individually or nationally so variable as taste. If humorous propaganda, especially in regard to accidents, be regarded as 'out of place,' because danger appears to be treated with undue levity or with coarse vulgarity, then annoyance, blended even with repugnance, supplants amusement.

It is noteworthy that *repugnance*, when it is blended with fear, instead of, as here, with annoyance (*i.e.* mild anger) is nothing but the horror which we have already in some detail been considering. Fear and amusement have yet another likeness in regard to accident prevention. They are each liable to produce a certain *contempt* for danger ; fear producing contempt as a defence-mechanism that serves to mask anxiety in a fearful situation, humour, on the other hand, producing contempt because of the feeling of superiority which its appreciation generally evokes and because of the escape from reality which, in greater or less degree, it entails.

CURRENT EXAMPLES OF HUMOROUS PROPAGANDA

Two examples of appropriately humorous posters designed in this country will serve to illustrate their high value. A picture of a piccolo player bears the legend: " Even if you aren't a piccolo player, you need all your fingers." Another poster depicts a worker who through sheer good fortune has escaped from being crushed by a falling massive iron frame : " We are not all born lucky " is printed beneath. Yet another example, concerning the forced landings of aeroplanes in country meadows, may be quoted from *Air Sense*¹ : " Try and imagine that the cows

¹ A booklet compiled by the National Air Safety Committee and published by the National " Safety First " Association. I am indebted to Lt.-Col. J. A. A. Pickard for this and previously cited illustrations.

which gallop so entertainingly down below are *your* cows. Until you have looked into the matter you simply can't imagine what goes on inside a galloping cow. Anyway, it turns the farmer sour and pilots who have cause to seek his aid afterwards may find him lacking in the milk of human kindness."

THE ABUSE OF LEVITY

A certain amount of amusement is well recognized as an aid to interest in school instruction. But nowadays there is too often a tendency to exaggerate the need for levity when information is imparted, especially in the more popular newspapers. The modern journalist seems—in my view quite wrongly—to think that a serious article must be made amusing by the introduction of often ridiculous captions and of often irrelevant thumb-nail sketches, and that without such supposed attractions the article will never be read by the masses. So, too, in propaganda for accident prevention, although amusement has a certain value, it must not be overdone.

CONCLUSION

Neither amusement nor fear can be regarded as sufficient for accident prevention. Each must be used in moderation. The most that these feelings can do alone is to instil a memory of a dangerous situation and of its effects. Alone they do not pretend to detail the rules of conduct which require to be observed for the avoidance of accident. Nor alone can they always indicate the best reasons which can be advanced for such avoidance. The cultivation of interest, worth-whileness and a sense of duty are essential in all learning, but to be effective they cannot solely rest either on fear or on amusement.